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## FAMILIAR QUOTATIONS: A SUGGESTION<sup>1</sup>

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A sense for tidiness in the use of words is rare in American school children. Ideas they have in abundance, and a great eagerness to communicate them to others. But an enthusiasm for simplicity, a burning zeal for terseness, a passion for orderly arrangement—such reactions, either to what they write or what they read, are difficult to arouse. Consequently our children's forms of expression, when they are most spontaneous and most original, are as a rule marred by extravagance, disorder, or downright slovenliness.

To counteract this not unnatural (and not necessarily unhealthy) tendency, the custom was once general of bringing the youthful mind under the domination of the classics. It was thought, and not without reason, that a pupil who was daily exposed to the influence of models of terseness, symmetry, and dignity of phrasing, especially in a highly organized language, might by degrees come to appreciate these qualities. He might even reproduce them in his forms of expression.

That the classical training was, in this particular, entirely and uniformly successful, no one, I suppose, is likely to maintain, but it did undoubtedly exercise a powerful influence. By filling the mind with noble rhythms and happily ordered phrases it helped to keep out paltry rhythms and vulgar phrases. It substituted for the cheap commonplaces of the literature of the day the fine, consummate expression of great ideas by Homer, by Virgil, and by Horace. Whatever crimes were committed in its name, the old classical training did this one thing, and did it very well.

Those times, however, for good or ill, are gone, and we must face the new conditions. Some day the classics may be restored

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Classical Conference at Ann Arbor, Michigan, April 3, 1919.

to their old position or, for all I know, to a higher one. But what are we to do in the meantime? Is there any method or device of teaching by which the classical ideal, for those who do not study the classics, may yet be maintained, and which, if the classicists so desire, may lead the way back to a greater interest in the originals? I think that there is such a way, and that it may be found in the use of a certain type of so-called familiar quotations.

Let me first ask what is meant by the term "familiar quotations," and how these peculiar forms of expression come into existence.

Of the enormous bulk of printed matter that is put out every year, amounting to perhaps 400 books a day (exclusive of magazines and newspapers), the greater part falls stillborn from the press. If it can be said to live at all, it survives only in the lists of the *Publishers' Weekly* and similar bibliographies. Though a curious hand may, indeed, turn over its pages now and then in bookstore or library, no warmth comes from it, nor any light, and it is put back on its shelf to await the everlasting bonfire.

Of the rest of the output the greater part, again, lives only for a little while. It was put together with infinite cunning to satisfy a transient need or to amuse an idle hour, and when the need or the hour has come to an end, it, too, passes into oblivion.

Of the original mass there now remains a small fraction. This, however, unlike the rest, has staying power. Because of the universal nature of its appeal, or the originality and value of its content, or the fineness of its workmanship, or a combination of all of these, it maintains its hold upon the attention of readers and gains year by year a securer place in general repute.

True, even works of this rank may seem to lapse at intervals and disappear from the thoughts of men; but presently they come back again, perhaps with increased prestige and influence, and finally take their allotted place among the indispensable instruments of culture. It is to this class of literature that we apply, in the broad sense applicable to all literature, the term "classics:"

It may seem that we have now reached, in this sifting process, the irreducible minimum, but even in the recognized masterpieces one may find passages that in point of quality rise far above the rest, and of these delectable passages some few have the mysterious

power not only of gaining public appreciation but of implanting themselves permanently in the popular mind and memory. These last we call familiar quotations.

The art or knack of giving to literature this staying power—what Holmes called the antiseptic quality—cannot, I need hardly say, be imparted. By no cleverness or sleight-of-hand or conscious effort of any sort can it be acquired. I often wonder at this. In every copy of the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *New Republic*, and the *Dial* there are so many superlatively clever phrases, so many ingenious contortions of syntax, that it is hard to understand why some of them do not, if merely by chance, pass into familiar quotations. But they never do. If now and then some phrase or word-coinage from one of these magazines is bandied about for a few days at the club or in the newspapers, it soon becomes hackneyed and presently insufferable. Of these hundreds and thousands of coinages not one seems ever to cross the mysterious line which divides the desert from the sown.

Compared with these writings the Authorized Version of the Bible is pretty dull reading. Yet for some reason or other nearly a thousand passages from the Bible are among the most familiar of quotations known, by hearsay at any rate, to every cultivated man and woman; whereas I think I may challenge anyone here before me to quote offhand a single passage from the other sources I have mentioned.

Once admitted to the mind and lodged in the memory, these chosen passages exert a powerful influence. They become, as it were, a part of us. Henceforth they are our standards, our touchstones. They guide our thoughts, they color our emotions. They affect our judgment of things and men and manners. And finally—what is most to our purpose now—they determine to a large extent our characteristic modes of expression.

This is true even when the quotations themselves do not readily come at call. They are not lost. Their patterns are stored up in the subliminal consciousness, guiding taste and practice not less powerfully than the forces that work in the open.

So much for the origin and value of familiar quotations in general. But even these unique passages may be submitted to

an ultimate sifting for our special purpose. As it happens, a considerable proportion of English familiar quotations are taken directly from the Greek and Latin classics. About 300 such passages are to be found in Bartlett's standard collection, comprising 434 lines of poetry and 51 lines of prose. The extent of their distribution in the original languages may be judged from the following list of authors: *Greek* writers—Aeschylus, Aesop, Aristides, Aristotle, Athenaeus, Callimachus, Diogenes Laertius, Euripides, Hesiod, Hippocrates, Homer, Menander, Philostratus, Pindar, Plato, Plutarch, Sophocles, Thales, Theocritus; *Latin* writers—Catullus, Cicero, Horace, Juvenal, Livy, Lucian, Lucretius, Martial, Ovid, Perseus, Plautus, Pliny (the Elder), Pliny (the Younger), Publilius Syrus, Quintilian, Seneca, Silius Italicus, Suetonius, Tacitus, Terence, Tibullus, Varro, Virgil.

These passages are the product not so much of translation as of transmigration—the soul of the original having passed over into an English body. They display, therefore, all the characteristic qualities of the Greek and Latin literatures. They rephrase, sometimes with greater art, what has already been expressed with taste, with gravity, and with conciseness in the classic tongues. I will give a few examples, taken, without exception, from Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*.

When Burton, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, says, "We can say nothing but what hath been said," he is illustrating in his own practice the sentiment that he utters, for he has only translated literally Terence's *Nihil dictum quod non dictum prius*. Beaumont and Fletcher in *Cupid's Revenge* have even bettered Seneca's characteristic aphorism, *Ignis aurum probat, miseria fortes viros*, in the terse phrasing, "Calamity is man's true touchstone"; with which may be compared Herrick's compression of Terence's line, *Nil difficilest quin quaerendo investigari possiet*, into "Nothing's so hard but search will find it out." "His red right hand" says Milton's Lucifer of the Almighty, the poet knowing right well—who could know better?—that he is conveying *pater et rubente dextera* from Horace's Second Ode of Book I. "To compare great things with small" is of course direct from Virgil's *Eclogues*.

So Dryden in his *Absalom and Achitophel*, seizing upon the apothegm of Publilius Syrus, *Furor fit laesa saepius patientia*, rendered it in the unforgettable phrase, "Beware the fury of a patient man." Almost as good is his paraphrase of Seneca's *Quos laeserunt et oderunt*, "But they ne'er pardon who have done the wrong." Matthew Henry took some of his best sayings straight from the classics, as "Blushing is the color of virtue" from Diogenes Laertius—attributed to Diogenes the philosopher—and "Not lost, but gone before," word for word from Seneca's epistles.

Tom Brown's "I do not love thee, Doctor Fell," is an almost literal rendering of Martial's *Non amo te, Sabidi, nec possum dicere quare; hoc tantum possum dicere, non amo te*. "The good die first" of Wordsworth is taken from Plautus. A fragment from Sophocles supplied Algernon Sidney with his "God helps those who help themselves." "He who fights and runs away, May live to fight another day," is Goldsmith's rendering of the famous line ascribed to Menander. From Martial Milton borrowed the line in *Paradise Lost*, "Nor love thy life nor hate," and from Tacitus the passage in *Lycidas* about fame. "I would far rather be ignorant than wise in the foreboding of evil," said Aeschylus in *The Suppliants*, and Gray embalmed the sentiment in his deathless lines, "Where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise." Cicero furnished Campbell with "Coming events cast their shadows before," and Thomson with "When unadorn'd adorn'd the most." Shakespeare rifled the classics with a busy hand, though not always at first hand. "Good wine needs no bush" is from Publilius Syrus. "At lovers' perjuries they say Jove laughs" is from Tibullus. "Brevity is the soul of wit" is from Sophocles. That death cancels all debts was said by Euripides in the *Alcestis*, but Shakespeare in *The Tempest* recasts it with a superb concision, "He that dies pays all debts."

Plutarch has assembled a brilliant array of traditional sayings remarkable not less for their terseness than for their mother-wit: "Strike, but hear me," "Caesar's wife must be above suspicion," "Better be first in a little Iberian village than second at Rome"

(Longfellow's version), "They call a spade a spade" (almost word for word from Aristophanes), Caesar's grave rebuke, "Young men, hear an old man to whom old men harkened when he was young," and Cato's "I had rather men should ask why my statue is not set up than why it is."

The point of my small thesis will now, I think, be clear. With materials in hand such as I have suggested, a teacher of English, or of any other subject, who is interested in the classics and the classic discipline, may bring a new influence to bear upon his pupils. He may say to them in all sincerity: "If you wish to know what the Greek and Latin literatures are like at their best, here are some small evidences. Repeating these brief passages, you may for a time breathe the spirit of the ancient world. Although nothing but an intimate acquaintance with the originals will give you a just idea of the opulence and sustained art of the classics, yet here you may see as in a glass darkly the sobriety, the wit, the humor, and the sad wisdom of that earlier time, together with its love of beauty, its felicity of phrasing, and its pride in severe thinking and perfect expression."

And having said so much, the teacher might advisedly go on to say: "But beware how you read these golden passages. They are dangerous to young minds. Through them you will come to realize the intolerance of the classic writers for some of the things that you may admire—for the sensational, the tawdry, the sentimental, the merely smart and voluble. There is danger that before you are aware you may yourself become intolerant of such qualities. Therefore drink deep or taste not the Pierian spring."

One possible by-product of the use of familiar quotations derived from the classics is worthy of mention—it is the addition of new material to the present stock. Many consummately beautiful passages in Greek and Latin are virtually unknown among English-speaking peoples because no one has as yet given them a definitive English setting. I am thinking now of such passages as the prayer of Ajax in the *Iliad*, Plato's few poems (and almost anything else from the Greek Anthology), the apostrophe of Prometheus to the sun and winds and ocean, Horace's *linquenda tellus et domus et placens uxor*.

A distinguished modern critic has said that in all Latin literature there is no more perfect passage than Virgil's *Georgics*, Book II, lines 458 to the end; and yet, as far as I can ascertain, not a single line of it, not even a single phrase, has been so translated as to make it strike root in the modern social consciousness.

The happiest feature of this suggestion, if it have any value, is that the opportunity is open to everybody. A moment of inspiration may, once in a lifetime, come to persons who have no gift for sustained translation. No one can foretell upon whose head the divine fire may descend next. Indeed, among the authors in Bartlett's collection are not a few whom a single felicitous passage has redeemed from oblivion.

In conclusion, let me guard against a misapprehension. When I speak of the use of familiar quotations I have not in mind the practice of compelling pupils to commit to memory the so-called memory gems. The passages to which I refer are, as I have pointed out, of such an insinuating character that the memory cannot reject them. No compulsion is necessary. All that is needed is to bring them sharply and sympathetically to the attention of the pupil. Once admitted to his inner consciousness, they are his forever.